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ABSTRACT

This publication discusses policy issues, practices, and research related to parent involvement in education in the United States. Written for local school boards, professional staff who work with boards, and interested parents, the paper calls for policies that will encourage parents to assist in their children's educational development. After an introductory historical perspective on parental involvement in the American public school system, the document looks at changes in the American family and the implications these changes have for the schools. The publication discusses types, levels, steps, roles, and strategies of parent involvement to promote an understanding of the parents' link to school board leadership. Other essays discuss the differences between parental involvement in the early grades and in middle and high grades, and the role of public schools in parent education. It is concluded that three policy goals should characterize all parent involvement regardless of the level of schooling: to promote the complete development of children, to enhance the role of the parent as the primary educator and caregiver of the child, and to help parents develop and use knowledge and skills that will enhance the educational level of families. The publication begins with a summary list of recommendations and concludes with an appended checklist for school board members to use in assessing their parent involvement policy and practice needs. (TE)

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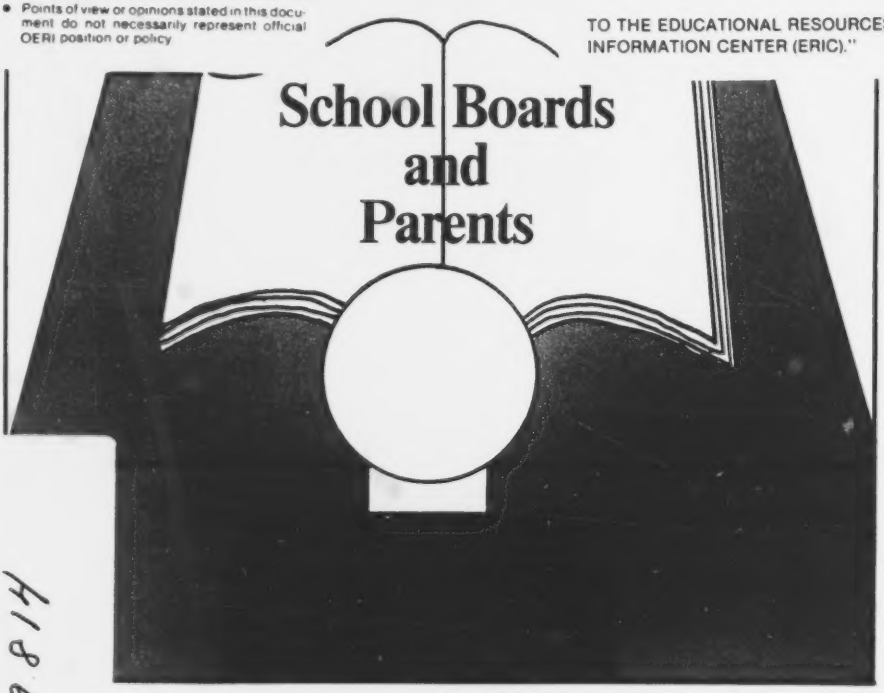

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A Position Paper of the
NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

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Home-School Partnership

School Boards and Parents

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NEW YORK STATE
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Summary of Recommendations

- Parents and institutions/agencies that serve as parents should work with school boards and professional educators in support of the goals and programs of public schools. Also, parents should be encouraged to engage directly in their children's learning experiences.
- Public schools should try to assist directly, in the short range, when family changes may affect students' learning directly.
- Local school boards should define the conditions of appropriate involvement in the contexts of legal obligation and local policy.
- Our educational institutions must attend to the total well-being of the student because they are charged with the education of the whole child.
- Pupil personnel staff should focus on identifying student problems and referring the students to those services which are rendered either by the school district or other agencies.
- School officials should conduct a survey of related social and educational agencies and their capabilities to contribute to a cohesive program of student support. Based on that information, schools then should *coordinate* student referrals to the services of local and community agencies so that children do not become victims of a breakdown of programs and services.
- School officials should seek appropriate family partners with whom to build a team relationship to help students grow intellectually, psychologically, and socially.
- Schools should plan effectively for a school-family team effort by using the four basic steps of analyzing, policy-making, implementing and evaluating.
- School boards should set a comprehensive parent involvement policy and from that develop a plan that includes goals, objectives, and strategies that will encourage and guide involvement of parents in the education of children.
- Parent involvement programs should be tailored to different audiences, but always with sensitivity to the needs of *all* parents.
- When implementing a program, all staff members should be involved and made aware that parents' involvement is a school priority.
- Teachers should be encouraged to consult parents to determine what factor(s) contribute to behavior changes in their children.
- School boards should encourage the use of strategies and techniques that have proven effective in helping staff and parents solve problems as a team.

- School boards should establish guidelines which protect the rights of parents, children, teachers, and other staff.
- Local school boards should develop, adopt, and disseminate policies and guidelines on homework.
- Parents should be encouraged to communicate with teachers about any problems their children may have completing homework assignments.
- Parents should be encouraged to establish a center for learning in the home and to develop and maintain a positive attitude toward homework.
- Rules governing the conduct of students in school should be developed by local school boards and provided in written form to parents and students. Parents and teachers should work as a team to enforce these rules.
- Local school boards should develop policies that clearly explain the requirements for attendance in a school district and outline the penalties involved when the attendance policy is not followed.
- Local school boards should develop policies that outline in detail the roles and responsibilities of citizen advisory committee members.
- School boards should develop policies that call for sharing information about school programs, services, facilities, and rules with parents. Also important are policies that explain how parents can become involved in practical and helpful ways that they can manage and with which school officials can feel comfortable.
- Parent involvement has the following major policy goals: to promote the complete development of children, enhance the role of the parent as primary educator and care-giver of the child, and help parents develop and use knowledge and skills that will enhance the level of families.
- Where parent education and assistance are concerned, the schools should not be expected to assume the role of directly providing services that may be available from other agencies. A careful sorting out of school and social service responsibilities is needed. The long-term needs of families and children should be met by social service organizations that collaborate with public school authorities.
- At the state level, there should be a priority on requiring higher educational institutions to develop programs that will enhance professional skills and knowledge related to involving parents in education and helping parents clarify their roles.
- At the local level, policymakers should help professional staff improve and maintain their preservice learning by supporting in-service programs which incorporate parental involvement needs, goals, and strategies.

- Schools should create a variety of forums in which parents and school officials can discuss what parents want and need to educate themselves for their parenting roles.
- Teachers stand on the front line of home-school communication. They should know how to give specific advice on steps that can be taken at home to reinforce or to modify a child's behavior, habit, or skill in relation to desirable learning both at home and at school.
- The principal should serve as the leader of building level teams, committees, or councils that involve parents, or tasks related to parent involvement.
- The principal should provide parents with written guidelines that include parents' rights and responsibilities. Parents should be told who the school contact person is for each type of situation.
- A key job responsibility for all pupil personnel staff should be working with parents in a team relationship. To follow up, performance evaluation should incorporate the effectiveness of carrying out this responsibility.
- School boards should develop, and superintendents should be held accountable for, policies which strongly encourage parent participation in the education of children at home, in school and in the planning, development, and operation of specified programs.

Preface

Among the factors identified by educational reformers as crucial to student achievement and success, few seem as powerful as parent involvement in education. Virtually every major national report addressing the current problems of American public education has urged greater parent involvement as a solution. The response of educators, parents, and elected officials at every level generally has been positive. Local school boards now have an excellent opportunity to bring focus and leadership to home-school relationships.

Appropriately, this publication discusses policy issues, practices, and research related to parent involvement in education. Written for local school boards, professional staff who work with boards, and certainly for interested parents, the paper calls for policies that will help make parent involvement a positive educational force.

The term *parent involvement* is used in this paper to describe all types of encouragement, preparation and opportunities for parents to assist in their children's educational development. The term *parents* is used to refer not only to biological parents who are responsible for the upbringing of children, but also to agencies and institutions that are legally accountable for the comprehensive welfare of children. Whoever assumes responsibility for the family environment of children should be encouraged by this paper to work with school boards and professional educators in support of the goals and programs of public schools. By the same token, it should be recognized that parents, as central figures in their children's education, can benefit from encouragement by local school boards, administrators, teachers and other school staff to engage directly in their children's learning experiences.

Types, levels, steps, roles, and strategies of parent involvement are explained in the following text to promote an understanding of their links to school board leadership. Neither school board nor parent roles are static. They have evolved from a unique history of democratic traditions, and they are being reshaped continually by demographic imperatives that will transform American social life completely within just a few decades. Accordingly, this discussion begins with a short review of historical and demographic trends.

An Historical Perspective

Parent involvement in the schools has been the cornerstone of the American school system since the colonial period. Until well into the 1800s, families shouldered most of the burden of education. This role grew naturally from the traditions of the homelands from which Americans came.

Families were the primary agents in the socialization of children. They trained children for specific social and occupational roles. Families shaped attitudes, formed patterns of behavior, and taught manners and morals. In the truest sense of the word, schooling belonged to families because each family member was involved in and responsible for the upbringing of children.

As time passed and communities grew, the complexities of our society and economy made families turn to formally established schools to deal with their children's learning. The idea of a group of citizens to control and administer the schools was born during this period, and family control of the transmission of culture and learning was changed.

During their history, American public schools have been cherished, chastised, or challenged, depending upon prevailing public expectations about educational cures for societal ills. Perhaps the schools' greatest historical triumph has been their ability to educate efficiently on a massive scale, helped by compulsory attendance laws. American public schools deserve credit for being great equalizers, providing opportunities to climb the country's socioeconomic ladder. In fulfilling their mission, that of dealing with students who, in the best interest of society, are *required* to attend—schools have benefited from a legal tradition known as *in loco parentis*. In essence, it has meant the courts have viewed teachers and administrators as serving in place of parents when they are responsible for student control and welfare during the school day.

Presently, our public schools are experiencing new state mandated reforms and legal requirements that may change the prerogatives of teachers irreversibly. At the same time, American family life is being redefined in ways that will influence drastically the public school's mission. Equality of opportunity is continually at stake. So, too, is the historically durable relationship between schools and parents. To understand why a mutual reinforcement of school-parent roles is needed, and how this can help preserve and strengthen the concept of educational equality, a demographic perspective will be useful.

The Changing Family

By the year 2000, major demographic changes will have altered drastically the makeup of the American family and public schools. The decline of two-parent households, the soaring divorce rate, the changing roles of wives and husbands in the labor force, and the increased incidence of unmarried and remarried parents are all forces that are reshaping the American family.

No longer can one assume that a family consists of a mother, father and child. In reality, this family concept is quite different from the vast majority of families in today's society. In 1955, 60 percent of the households in America consisted of a working father, a housewife mother, and two or more school-age children. By 1980, 11 percent of homes represented the traditional family unit; by 1985, the proportion had slipped to seven percent.

Family patterns have changed in the last four decades partly as a result of the divorce rate. More than one million children are affected by new divorces each year in the United States, representing about two percent of all children under the age of 18. (Population Reference Bureau, Inc., 1984) Of every 100 children born today, 40 are born to parents who will divorce before the child is 18. (Hodgkinson, 1985) Consequently, the number of single parent households is increasing rapidly.

A second factor is the dramatic rise in the number of women in the work force. Historically, most American wives have not worked outside the home. However, World War II caused a revolution in women's work patterns. In 1948, 11 percent of married women with children were in the labor force. Today, that figure is more than 50 percent. (Population Reference Bureau, Inc., 1984)

Another change which has had a complex and lasting influence on the family is the upsurge in the number of children born outside of marriage. In 1960, that figure was five percent; in 1981 it was 18 percent. One out of every five children born in 1985 was born to an unmarried mother. Fifty percent are born to teenage mothers. These children tend to be economically and socially deprived and linguistically and ethnically diverse.

Changes in American family composition have produced a substantial increase in the number of family roles experienced by each individual. No longer is it typical, as was the case 30 years ago, for individuals to live with parents until marriage, then have children and continue living with the same spouse until widowed. Now lifestyles are apt to involve a combination of living with parents, living alone, cohabitation with another adult, marriage, perhaps followed by children, divorce, and eventual repetition of the cycle. As transition points multiply, instability results not only for the individuals directly involved, but also for any children who arrive along the way.

How Should the School Respond?

Diversity and change in American family life require schools to respond to the needs of children who as a group have fewer common family reference points than ever before. These children, referred to as *at risk*, relate to schools, peers, and teachers in ways that are more varied and individualized than was true a few years ago. Moreover, as the schools attempt to work with parents of at-risk children, they must tailor their contacts to fit the unique family circumstances of the child involved. Increasingly, research shows that schools are acutely aware of their challenges and limitations in this regard.

Among the many studies of at-risk children and youth, one of the most thorough on local school-community programs was conducted by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in 1985-86. In a statewide survey of local district programs, the Department defined children at risk as dropouts and other K-12 pupils whose school achievement, progress toward graduation, or preparation for employment were in serious jeopardy due to defined types of circumstances. Nine of every ten districts in the state participated. Initial findings included a ranking of factors which inhibit school efforts to help at-risk children. Among 15 types of inhibitors, the schools felt that "unstable family situations among children at risk" were the most serious. Virtually tied for second place with insufficient funds to hire staff, was "lack of parental interest or support for school efforts regarding children at risk."

As the at-risk population swells and diversifies, the educational implications that emerge have far-reaching consequences for schools and for society.

Though the implications may be readily apparent, they are extremely difficult to address effectively without new forms of school-parent teamwork. Latchkey children and teenage pregnancy illustrate two of the critical social challenges for which new teamwork is needed. Divorce and working parents contribute significantly to the approximately four million latchkey children of school age. Many of these children are alone after school in an unsupervised environment. They may experience some fears and have many responsibilities. One common fear is that (the) parent(s) may not return. Children of divorced parents often believe in the domino theory—if the father leaves, then why not the mother. (Wallerstein, 1981) They have the responsibility for deciding whom to admit into their homes. To date, research has failed to clearly define specific school problems which latchkey children may have; however, Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1978), in his re-

search, indicated that latchkey children are often peer oriented and less satisfied with themselves, their parents and society. Logic and common sense would argue that some may develop emotional and social problems. *Both have a significant impact on academic achievement.*

Teenage pregnancy is another troubling challenge for the schools. Nationally, about 11 percent of teenage girls become pregnant each year. In New York state, every year approximately one of ten adolescent females between the ages of 15 and 19 becomes pregnant. For adolescents 10 to 14 years old, the statistic is even more alarming. Since 1974, their pregnancy rate has increased 36 percent. (Second Report of the Governor's Task Force on Adolescent Pregnancy, 1986)

Parenthood often interrupts the normal course of academic education. It is estimated that 12,000 to 18,000 of the 50,000 New York state youth who dropped out of school in 1984-85 were teenage parents. (New York State Education Department, 1987) Moreover, the children of teenage parents clearly face more difficulties in growing up than children born to women who are older. Statistics show that 14 percent of the babies born to adolescents under age 15 are of low birth weight. For women 25 to 29, it is fewer than 6 percent. Low birth weight increases the risk of health problems such as anemia and toxemia. It is also related to academic problems. The offspring of teen parents tend to score lower on cognitive tests and to perform less well in school. (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1985)

To generalize about the educational needs of at-risk children can be misleading. Nonetheless, they seem to respond best to individual attention. Care should be taken to use materials and techniques specifically designed to meet the individual instructional needs of students. The self-concept of at-risk students should not be ignored. Professionals, through programmatic offerings that provide a measure of success for *all* students, should seek to create a climate where students feel comfortable in the educational environment.

At-risk students also should be provided with alternative learning methods which rely upon practical and immediate application. There should be a professional team approach to education in a truly caring environment that often extends into the community.

However, neither the schools nor any other social institution should be called upon to do all that families cannot or will not do. The home should be free from excessive outside interference. There are times, however, when family changes and problems obviously affect student academic and social growth. When there is good reason to believe that somehow alleviating those problems will assist learning directly, schools should assist directly. This is especially true if a *short-range* solution looks promising. Local school boards should define the conditions of appropriate involvement in the contexts of legal obligation and local policy. Educational institutions must attend to the total well-

being of the student because they are charged with the education of the whole child.

Public schools have pupil personnel staff—guidance counselors, psychologists and social workers—to assist students, often and ideally with family cooperation. These staff members should focus substantial attention on identifying student problems and referring the students to those services that are rendered either by the school district or other agencies.

To accomplish this task successfully, school officials should conduct an objective survey of related social and educational agencies and their capabilities to contribute to a cohesive program of student support. Schools should then take the initiative to *coordinate* referrals to the services of local and community agencies so that children do not become victims of a breakdown of programs and services.

Briefly put, the foregoing discussion points straight to the need for a team relationship between the home and the school. Often that teamwork is thwarted by the demographic dilemmas noted. The best that public schools can do in these circumstances is to plan programs that focus on learning, work within the limitations of resources and legal responsibilities, and establish networks of community referral that may give at-risk children and their parents comprehensive support.

Parent Involvement and Student Achievement

The involvement of parents in the education of children is crucial to student achievement and student success. The evidence is clear. Decades of study continue to show that when parents assist with and reinforce the instructional and disciplinary activities of the schools, students' academic achievement increases, their attitudes, behavior and performance improve, and their interpersonal relations within the home are enhanced.

Review of Research

A watershed study on achievement conducted by Coleman (1966) determined that, among other factors, a student's positive attitude about himself and his control over the environment are critical to achievement. Coleman controversially concluded that family background is the most important factor in a child's education.

Reanalyses of Coleman's data, along with newer studies, have confirmed the importance of school influence, but the impact of family on a child's learning remains undeniably critical. In one reanalysis of Coleman's data, Mayeshe (1973) identified three important family influences that seem to determine achievement: (1) student and parent expectations for academic performance, (2) the extent to which families engage in activities to support expectation, and (3) the student's attitude toward hard work as necessary to succeed. High achievers are much more likely to have active, interested and involved parents than are low achievers. (Ranhin, 1967)

Longitudinal evaluations of preschool programs find that children who are subject to early educational intervention programs show higher and more lasting gains *if* their mothers are actively involved in their learning. (Bronfenbrenner, 1974)

Parents' educational role in the home and increased interaction between home and school has been shown to relate significantly to improved scores on standardized tests. (Gallagher, 1976)

Families of elementary school children, questioned about how they spend time with their children, confirm that shared education activities relate to better student performance in school. (Benson, 1979 & 1986) Some school districts have experimented with involving parents in improving children's reading skills. Results have indicated that the district with the most comprehensive parent program tends to score the greatest achievement gains. (Gillum, 1977)

Not surprisingly, these studies all point in the same direction. When parents show a strong interest in or are involved with their children's schooling, academic performance improves.

Time constraints are major negative factors in parent participation programs. Parents seldom have enough time to attend all meetings or to become extensively involved in classroom activities.

Although the value of having parents involved in education is well established, many educators are cautious because their experiences with parents may have been negative. Parents do not always approve of the curriculum or textbooks selected and sometimes seek to impose their personal ideologies. Not all parents are dependable volunteers. They sometimes fail to participate in scheduled activities and to meet deadlines. This poses problems for teachers since they must seek last-minute substitutes and reschedule events and activities.

Time constraints are major negative factors in parent participation programs. Parents seldom have enough time to attend all meetings or to become extensively involved in classroom activities. Likewise, teachers have difficulty finding time to nurture, encourage, and monitor parents who may feel insecure in the classroom setting. Time is required to recognize diversity in skills and to become aware of parents who can function independently versus those who cannot.

Parents also may be reluctant about becoming involved in the schools. They may either feel that their assistance is unwanted by school officials, that they do not have the necessary skills and abilities to become involved, or that their personal schedules would not allow them to do so. More importantly, for a growing number of parents schools can be a formidable place, especially if their own, or their latest schooling experience was unproductive or intimidating. Parents are vulnerable to their negative feelings when they return to school, for any reason. The challenge is to ease these negative feelings in order to establish a strong and fully functioning *partnership* among parents, teachers, administrators, and school boards—one that is built upon good communication, trust, and action rather than rhetoric. Teamwork has the power to help students grow intellectually, psychologically and socially.

Types of Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is varied and diverse. It can take one of many forms: parents as partners, parents as collaborators and problem solvers, parents as advisors and parents as supporters. The form of involvement does not seem to be critical, as long as it is well-planned and comprehensive.

The activities included in a partnership are the key to successful family-school relationships. They may include reading aloud to children, signing homework, giving spelling or math drills, visiting the classroom to observe teachers' methods, taking the child to the library, and making formal contracts with teachers to supervise special projects.

Many of these family or parental activities are not widely used by public schools. Reading aloud to children, encouraging discussion between parents and children, using informal activities such as games at home, developing formal contracts with teachers, and tutoring children in math and spelling drills, are the most frequently used school-family activities. Yet, they are formally asked of only one of every four families by school officials. (Epstein, 1986)

This failure may suggest either a sparsity of research to link specific home-family activities with student achievement and success, an absence of policy-directed school leadership in promoting such activity, or an unwillingness initially of the parent to participate.

Generally, researchers have attempted to describe the activities included in each type of involvement, and to determine what effects, if any, they may have on academic achievement.

Parents as Partners

Schools and families share responsibility for the education and socialization of children. For example, at an early age, most children learn language and social skills from their families. Learning these skills is continuous and does not end once a child enters school. What does end is the sole role of parents as teachers of language and social skills. They must now begin to share responsibility with professional educators.

These responsibilities should not conflict or compete. Parents should not contend that their method of teaching is the only correct way, and teachers, simply because they are professionally trained, should not undermine the strategies used by parents. If schools treat parents as powerless or unimportant or if they discourage parents from taking a continuing interest, then schools promote the development of atti-

tudes in parents, and consequently in children, that inhibit achievement. Schools and families should coordinate their efforts by working as a team.

A successful team effort that has been reproduced widely in New York state is the Parents as Reading Partners Program. At the Thomas Edison Elementary School in the Tonawanda School District, for example, parents and grandparents serve as reading partners with students in grades one through five. They are required to listen to and assist with the oral reading performance of students. The program has maintained a 93 percent participation rate annually. (Schwob, 1986)

How is a team effort accomplished? School districts must plan effectively. Essentially, planning involves four basic steps: analyzing, policy-making, implementing and evaluating (see Appendix A).

Analyzing requires schools to assess the extent of parents' current involvement. If there is minimal involvement, then schools may need to identify new ways to involve families. Where there is no involvement, schools need to initiate programs. First, it is necessary to find out if parents are interested in becoming involved. School districts can conduct a survey to determine the parents' interest level. If interest is not there, then schools may devise mechanisms for generating interest. For example, schools could invite parents to an information session, highlighting activities that occur in school. Second, training sessions for staff need to be initiated so that they can learn the procedures, programs and policies necessary for successful school-family partnerships, and the problems involved in developing them.

Policy-making is the second step involved in planning a partnership. School boards should develop a comprehensive parent involvement policy. If they seriously wish to foster a better relationship between parents and schools, developing policy is a step in the right direction. An outgrowth of that policy is a plan which outlines goals, objectives and strategies to encourage and guide involvement of parents. Without a plan, parent involvement becomes rhetoric.

Implementing is a third step. This effort takes time and great care. School districts must be sensitive to the needs of *all* parents. Care should be taken to tailor various programs to different audiences. For example, in disadvantaged areas, programs to train parents and help build confidence in the schools may be necessary first. In any case, the following steps may be used:

1. Plan for the parent involvement program. Determine what the needs of the school are prior to involving parents.
2. Invite a parent or a group of parents to help organize and operate the program.
3. Use a parent as a parent coordinator.
4. Solicit suggestions which highlight the concerns of *all* parents from *all* socioeconomic backgrounds.

All staff members should be involved and made aware that parents' involvement is a school priority. One on one, teacher and parent form the strongest liaison for effective education.

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5. Sensitize teachers and other staff to recognize the diverse skills among parents. Structure activities which reflect this diversity.
6. Provide orientation and training for teachers and parents.
7. Monitor, encourage, and evaluate all activities.
8. Highlight parent involvement activities in simple newsletters, news articles, and other forms of media.

All staff members should be involved and made aware that parents' involvement is a school priority. *One on one, teacher and parent form the strongest liaison for effective education.*

Evaluating is a fourth step. This step determines the effectiveness of teacher-parent-child relationships and of the broader school programs. The first level of evaluation is to determine how well the collaborative classroom effort is working. If flaws are detected, tasks and activities may be restructured.

The second level of evaluation is to examine the total program. While at the first level, concern is focused on the collaborative effort, the second level evaluates the extent to which the total process of parent involvement is meaningful and successful in the classroom and school. (Morrison, 1978)

Parents as Collaborators and Problem Solvers

The parents' role as effective collaborators/problem solvers is essential to resolving problems which may arise with a child's learning or behavior. Effective collaboration may include assisting with homework, discipline problems, and attendance problems.

Parents as problem solvers may assist teachers with conceptualizing changes in student behavior and student achievement. For ex-

ample, a decline in grades, frequent truancy, difficulty with peers, and disruptive behavior require that teachers seek to understand the nature of the problem and find possible solutions. Teachers should be encouraged to consult parents to determine what factor(s) may be contributing to the behavior change. Problem solving sessions are no easy task. Parents often view conferences with counselors, teachers and other staff as threatening, and potentially harmful.

What can school boards do to help alleviate the fears of parents? They should encourage the use of strategies and techniques that have proven effective in helping school staff and parents solve problems as a team. Also, boards should seek to establish guidelines which protect the rights of parents and children as well as teachers and other staff.

Parents and Homework

Homework positively affects student achievement. Several studies offer support for this statement. One of the best is a synthesis of 15 empirical studies showing that the effects of homework on learning are strong and consistent, especially when it is assigned regularly and commented on or graded. (Walberg, Paschal and Weinstein, 1985)

Teachers have the responsibility to assign homework. It is also true that the cooperation of parents is needed to insure that children complete the assignments. Parents should communicate effectively with teachers about any problems their children may have completing assigned tasks.

Parents should familiarize themselves with a school district's policies and guidelines on homework. Where none is available, then school boards should make sure they are developed, adopted and distributed.

A 1986 NYSSBA survey of middle grades in 382 New York state school districts showed that only 42 percent had written homework policies. Even when available, they are not always used effectively. A separate analysis of the homework policies in 77 school districts in New York state revealed three types of problems: (1) homework was not assigned based on individual needs; (2) policies varied from learning principles; and (3) many teachers did not grade, correct or return homework assignments. (McDermott, Goldman and Varenne, 1984)

Parents should establish a center for learning in the home. They should create a place for their children to work, keep research resources available for them and set regular working times. Above all, parents should develop and maintain a positive attitude toward homework. This will in turn promote the development of attitudes in children that will support achievement and confidence of success.

Not all parents, however, are effective in supervising their children's homework. Some lack interest, others self-confidence, others know-how. Still others are not available to supervise because of various

economic factors. Whenever these situations occur, the cognitive growth of children may be affected. The help of special teachers becomes vitally important.

Teachers should allot time to invite parents to the school. They should arrange to be available when parents are available—but teachers should avoid interrupting student instructional time. Teachers should discuss activities, materials, subjects and projects that students will be working with throughout the school year. They also should discuss the role of homework and encourage parents to review their children's school work.

Parents and Discipline

Good behavior begins at home. It is important that parents help their children become self-disciplined, and cooperate with school officials when it becomes necessary to deal with disciplinary problems.

The kind of discipline that is encouraged in the home and high grade performance are related. A recent study examined a diverse group of nearly 8,000 students to determine the effects of "upbringing" on grade performance. Three types of parents were identified: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Authoritative parents set clear standards for their children, engaged them in open discussions and expected mature behavior. Their children received higher grades than students with authoritarian parents who insisted on automatic obedience, or permissive parents who were tolerant of their children's behavior, failed to set standards and placed little importance on grades and school work. (*New York Times*, 1986)

School boards are required by state regulation to develop, with the assistance of parents and others, rules governing the conduct of students in school. Parents and teachers, moreover, should work as a team in enforcing the school and/or district discipline policies, which must be given in written form to all parents and students.

Parents and Truancy

New York State Law imposes penalties on parents if they do not see that children comply with attendance laws. The laws authorize school districts to employ attendance officers to investigate non-attendance and ensure that children attend school. Truancy has become widespread in our nation's schools. In fact, principals rank it as one of their most perplexing problems. (NASSP, 1975)

What are the educational consequences of truancy? Educators believe that it deprives students of information, understanding and skills. According to teaching/learning theories, each day's learning builds upon previous learning. Thus, each day's absence exalts a penalty in learning. Unexcused absenteeism also is associated with employment problems later in life.

Parents should play a strong role in combatting truancy. They can serve as role models, initiate activities to improve and then monitor their children's behavior, maintain an open line of communication with their children and teachers, and take an active interest in their children's activities.

Local school boards have a crucial role in helping to maintain attendance in the schools. They should adopt policies based on statutory and constitutional restraints which clearly explain the requirements for attendance in a school district. Boards also should outline the penalties involved when the attendance policy is not followed.

Parents as Advisors

Parents may serve as advisors to educators in establishing school procedures. Advising is the least practiced and the most controversial type of parent involvement.

School boards realize that parents have a basic responsibility to understand and participate in the institutional process which educates their children. This responsibility often is served best by having parents on advisory committees. A recent NYSSBA survey revealed that 32 percent of New York state school districts use at least some permanent citizen committees, and another 23 percent use citizen advisory groups on an occasional or ad hoc basis. Such committees help to work out solutions to school or district-wide problems, develop plans and make recommendations, or serve as school supporters and links to the community. To ensure productivity for such committees, policies should be developed which outline in detail the roles and responsibilities of the members.

Parents as Supporters

Traditionally, parents have provided a wide range of school support. They serve as volunteers, both to their own children's teachers and to the school as a whole; as room parents in elementary schools, volunteers in libraries, tutors for children with special needs, and chaperones at social functions and field trips. Parents sponsor and coordinate fund-raising events which support the schools by paying for special equipment or programs that may not be included in the school's budget.

Also, parents have in the past and should be encouraged strongly in the future to organize support groups to assist students with substance abuse problems. Some of these efforts have national dimensions. The Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and Students Against Driving Drunk (SADD) are two praiseworthy initiatives.

Parental Involvement in the Early Grades Versus Middle and High Grades

Parent involvement is generally regarded as a priority in elementary schools. Admittedly, parents are less active in middle and high school than in elementary school. This does not negate the importance of their role. On the contrary, parents are as important as ever, but their role *necessarily* becomes different.

In early grades, parent involvement is typified by chaperoning for field trips, serving as tutors in special programs, working in the library, cafeteria and other school-related areas. Early childhood programs, including the longstanding and successful federally supported Headstart program, as well as the state's growing prekindergarten grant program, rely heavily upon parent involvement. The parent component may take the form of supplying informational handbooks or conducting workshops or seminars for parents. Whatever the form, some involvement by parents is a prerequisite for funding. In secondary schools the type and extent of involvement becomes different because of logistical, locational, curricular, and plant size considerations.

Logistical problems begin with the absence of the self-contained class and the creation of departmentalization. Students have several rather than one teacher. Parents often are confused about who teaches what and to whom they should communicate their concerns. The issue of location is a second barrier to secondary parent involvement. Parents may feel comfortable with elementary schools that are usually located in their neighborhoods. Secondary schools generally are not. They are often located away from home and in unfamiliar settings.

The curriculum is a third barrier. Many parents fail to understand the subject areas their children are exposed to on a daily basis. Therefore, they cannot provide assistance with homework, nor can they volunteer as tutors.

A final barrier is size. More often than not, the sheer size of secondary schools intimidates parents. They get both physically and psychologically lost when confronted by miles of school hallways. Each of these barriers or impediments can be made all the more insurmountable by the attitude of adolescents that parents somehow will embarrass or humiliate them if they make themselves known to teachers.

There is no panacea for the problem of parental disconnection at the secondary level. However, each of the barriers just described can

be lowered to some extent by the development of local school board policies which call for sharing information about school programs, services, facilities, and rules with parents. Also important are policies that explain how parents can become involved in practical and helpful ways that they can manage and with which school officials can feel comfortable.

There are three critical areas that parents of secondary children should be concerned with: monitoring and supporting their children's academic progress, helping to prepare children for the transition to the world of work, and guiding the social world of children. If parents are involved in these areas, they will greatly assist overworked school counselors and teachers.

Essentially, three policy goals should characterize all parent involvement regardless of the level of schooling: to promote the complete development of children, to enhance the role of the parent as the primary educator and care-giver of the child, and to help parents develop and use knowledge and skills which will enhance the level of families.

Public Schools and Parent Education

Parent education can be defined as providing for the development and use of knowledge and skills appropriate to planning for, creating, giving birth to, rearing and/or providing care for children. (Morrison, 1978) This definition is not intended to be all encompassing; rather, it is designed to establish a guide for this discussion.

If current trends and family changes suggest anything at all, it is that parents need support in the rearing of children. Being a parent in our society can be joyful; on the other hand, it also can be a difficult and often stress-producing job. Contrary to the belief of many Americans, parenting is not instinctive; the ability to raise children wisely is not a "natural" talent. It is an effort that requires conscientiousness and continuity, and even then one must be prepared for the failures, anxieties and doubts which may arise.

Traditionally, the extended family provided models and mentors for child-rearing practices. But changes in our society have left many parents isolated, without sufficient support, and lacking reference points for practices and information.

Faced with such a state of affairs, parents turn to outside organizations for assistance. Increasingly, parents expect public schools to help them find solutions to social issues spawned by changes in family structure. Working mothers ask schools to address child care needs. Single parents look to schools as one of their few enduring institutional ties. Parents of teenagers look to schools for advice about drugs and sex issues. (Rich, 1986)

Social service agencies may not be capable of providing a full range of parenting services to *all* families who desire or simply need them. Programs may be restricted to a select few based on needs, income requirements, and health restrictions. Clearly, it is not only the poor, the handicapped or families in crisis that need support. There is evidence that many parents and children of all socioeconomic backgrounds suffer from a degree of isolation unique to our modern, mobile society. (Education Commission of the States Report #57, 1975) To this end, some professionals, educators and legislators view the public school as a service organization that can and should take more responsibility to deliver parent education to all families and children.

It is complimentary to school boards, administrators, teachers, and other staff that parents have confidence in their potential to serve as a source of parent education. However, schools should not be expected to assume the role of directly providing services available from other agencies. What is needed is a careful sorting out and defining of the roles and responsibilities of public schools and of social service agen-

For some students to succeed, it is vital that their schools be a community resource for coordinating the delivery of "human" services.

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cies. The present system is fragmented. Many families and children "slip through the cracks" and fail to receive needed services.

Public schools are logical coordinators of referrals to health services, counseling, guidance and mental health services which can enable children to come to school more able to learn. For some students to succeed, it is vital that their schools be a community resource for coordinating the delivery of "human" services. It is recognized equally that the schools' direct services should be extended only on a short-term basis while support personnel diagnose needs and seek more appropriate agencies for referral purposes. Once referred, the long-term needs of families and children should be met by social service organizations which collaborate with public school authorities.

Educators and public policymakers recently have devoted much time and effort to setting new student performance standards and to redefining the roles and responsibilities of public schools and social service agencies. Now, it is imperative that just as much effort be concentrated on the preservice and inservice training provided to professionals working in schools and other human service agencies.

At the state level, there should be a priority on requiring higher educational institutions to develop programs that will enhance professional skills and knowledge related to involving parents in education and helping parents clarify their roles. At the local level, policymakers can help teachers, administrators, and other professional support staff improve and maintain their preservice learning by supporting inservice programs which incorporate parental involvement needs, goals, and strategies. One of the simplest and most effective approaches may be to create a variety of forums in which parents and school officials can discuss what parents want and need to educate themselves for their parenting roles.

Roles of Involvement

Parents belong at the center of children's education. They should be encouraged to engage directly in their children's education. To do this, parents need open communication and support from the administrators, teachers, and other school staff.

Teachers stand on the front line of home-school communications. Research on effective home-school communications confirms that parents prefer the direct approach: in-person meetings, telephone conversations, or visits to the school. The parent typically wants direct communication with his or her child's teacher so that the most up-to-date, relevant, and personally knowledgeable information about the child's educational progress can be provided. If a child develops a school-related problem, the person logically in touch with that problem will be the person who often serves as a surrogate parent: the teacher. The teacher should know how to give specific advice on steps that can be taken at home to reinforce or to modify a child's behavior, habit, or skill in relation to desirable learning both at home and at school. Through the teacher, the child's home and school environments can be mutually reinforced.

Parent and teacher contacts are encouraged by regularly scheduled conferences or school visits. Also, through the PTA, and other school-community organizations, or by means of volunteer work, the links between teachers and parents are strengthened. It is the teacher as a contact who can make the parent feel comfortable and positively useful. But teachers, like parents, sometimes resist making contact. Dr. James Comer of the Yale Child Study Center has pointed out the potential backfire effect of parent participation:

> Where parent participation has not been well thought out and well structured, parents' concerns about teaching methods, the goals of the school, and even the competence of the staff can lead to conflict. For this reason, many educators shy away from parent participation programs (1986).

This observation highlights an opportunity for principals to exercise authority and judgment by coordinating and planning organizational contact for parents. Also, the principal should serve as the leader of building level teams, committees, or councils that involve parents or are charged with tasks related to parental involvement.

Principals may have several important roles vis-a-vis parents: as a middleman between the parent and the district office or external agencies, able to guide the parent through often intricate legalities and procedures; as a guide or helper, available to resolve serious short-

term disputes between parents and their children if those disputes threaten the child's educational welfare; and as molder of staff opinion regarding the relationships between teachers and parents.

Student discipline, for example, can undermine staff morale when the staff feels that the principal is not ready to back them up when a parent problem arises. Accordingly, the ideal role for the principal is to support teachers and, if necessary, mediate parent-teacher disputes which can divert the teacher from instructional duties.

The principal-parent relationship is sometimes complicated by the fact that lawyers, police, or other community authorities may intervene. Where legal steps are important, parent-principal contacts are not only advisable; they are sometimes mandatory.

Finally, principals also have a special responsibility to provide parents with written guidelines that include such factors as parents' rights and responsibilities. Within the context of the guidelines, parents should be informed of the school contact person for each type of situation.

In spite of the diversified roles of the principal, notwithstanding, especially in larger schools, it is unrealistic to expect principals to be a primary contact person for individual parents. Often guidance counselors are given this responsibility. The New York State School Boards Association's 1986 survey of middle schooling showed that communicating with parents was viewed by nearly two-thirds of responding districts as second, third, or fourth in importance on a nine item list of typical guidance counselors' duties. The main task for counselors was class scheduling. Along with other survey findings, this suggests counselors may find less and less time to deal with parents directly and personally, even though its importance is recognized. This trend should be reversed. A key job responsibility for all pupil personnel staff should be working with parents in a team relationship. To follow up, performance evaluation should incorporate the effectiveness of carrying out this responsibility.

Teachers, principals, guidance counselors and all other school staff members must be encouraged to work with parents as partners in educating children. Aggressive new steps to improve the home and school partnership are overdue.

From beginning to end, school boards are the proper change agents. Readiness can be turned into real effort only if school boards develop and superintendents are held accountable for implementing *comprehensive parent involvement policies* that create the climate and the mechanisms to draw parents meaningfully into the main arena of education.

APPENDIX A
Parental Involvement Policy and Practice Needs Assessment

This assessment instrument is designed to help school board members and others assess their parent involvement policy and practice needs. It covers some basic areas that should be considered prior to initiating a parent involvement effort either at the school building level or district-wide. The measure is not intended to be all encompassing, but it may inspire additional analysis of needs or adapted use.

(Answer yes or no to the following questions.)

School Boards

_____ 1. Does the board of education have written community relations goals?

_____ 2. Does the board of education have written policies concerning parental involvement in the schools?

_____ 3. Is parental input solicited by the board or superintendent when new policies are being developed?

4. Does the board have written policies to handle complaints regarding:
   - _____ a. policies
   - _____ b. curricula or instructional materials
   - _____ c. facilities
   - _____ d. support services
   - _____ e. school personnel?

5. Are parental complaints about current policies or policy implementation handled by:
   - _____ a. the school principal
   - _____ b. the superintendent
   - _____ c. the board of education directly?

_____ 6. Do parents know where to direct their complaints and comments?

_____ 7. Are parents generally satisfied with the board's response to their complaints?

_____ 8. Does the board encourage parent attendance and comments at board meetings?

_____ 9. Are parents encouraged to join advisory committees to the board?

_____ 10. Are board meetings generally well-attended by parents?
_____ 11. Are parents informed of board action and regular meeting times by a school newsletter or other direct communication between parents and the board?

Principals

_____ 1. Is there an orientation program for new students and their families?
_____ 2. Does the school run events where parents and school staff can get acquainted?
_____ 3. Does the school hold open houses during the year?
_____ 4. Are parents permitted to observe classes?
_____ 5. Are parent-teacher conferences regularly scheduled throughout the year?
_____ 6. May parent-teacher conferences be scheduled upon request of the parent or teacher?

7a. What percentage of parents are members of the parent-teacher organization(s) operating in your school?
_____ under 25 percent _____ 25-50 percent
_____ 50-75 percent _____ 75-90 percent
_____ 90 percent or above

7b. Of this membership, what percentage attend meetings regularly?
_____ under 25 percent _____ 25-50 percent
_____ over 50 percent

8. Are parent-teacher organization meetings held:
_____ directly after school
_____ at night?

_____ 9. Do you regularly attend parent-teacher organization meetings?
_____ 10. Are parents made aware of important dates such as report card circulation, open school nights, parent-teacher conferences, etc.?
_____ 11. Are you, as principal, available fairly regularly or at scheduled times to discuss school matters with concerned parents?

Problem Solving

_____ 1. Are parents consulted promptly by teachers if a child is having academic or social problems?
_____ 2. Is there a follow-up policy to keep parents informed as to progress or continual concern in regard to these special problem areas?

_____ 3. Are parents asked to become directly involved in helping solve such problems?
_____ 4. Does the school inform parents promptly of student absences?
_____ 5. Are parents informed of chronic attendance problems?
_____ 6. Are parents invited to attend conferences between students and guidance counselors regarding occupational or college planning?
_____ 7. Are parents involved in the scheduling aspects of their child's curriculum either in person or by signing the student's planned course schedule?

Volunteers

_____ 1. Is there written policy regarding the use of volunteers in classroom and other activities?
_____ 2. Does the school have an organized volunteer program?
_____ 3. Does the program include volunteers from the entire community, i.e., retired people, business leaders, local citizens, parents and students?
_____ 4. Are volunteers trained to participate in classroom and other activities?
_____ 5. Are volunteers encouraged to participate in classroom and other activities?
_____ 6. Is there a wide variety of jobs available for volunteers?

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